

JUNE 12, 2002

SCHAKOWSKY: "DEMANDAMOS JUSTICIA FOR BRACEROS"

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) demanded justice for the 400,000 Mexican workers, or braceros, who came to the U.S as part of a temporary guest worker program between 1942 and the late 1960s. Braceros were forced to surrender 10% of their wages in order to be placed in a savings fund, which would be paid to them upon their return to Mexico. Many never received payment.

In March 2001, a lawsuit was filed on their behalf charging the U.S., Mexico, and several major banks with breach of contract and breach of trust and fiduciary duty. At a news conference on Capitol Hill today, Schakowsky joined former braceros and members of Congress, including Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), author of the Bracero Justice Act, to call for immediate passage of the legislation. The bill would ensure that the case filed on behalf of the braceros would move forward without the threat of being thrown out on technicalities.

Below is Schakowsky's statement from today's news conference.

This is not a matter of charity. This is not a matter of ethnicity. It is a matter of justice. Demandamos justicia!

I am proud to join my colleague from Chicago, Representative Gutierrez, and the other cosponsors in introducing this bill, the Bracero Justice Act of 2002. It would be a shame if this important effort - demanding fairness and justice for thousands of workers who, in many cases, left their families in Mexico to come work in America for our benefit - were dismissed on technicalities.

It is a disgrace that money withheld from a worker's paycheck, with the promise that it would be saved on their behalf, should never be returned. It is unacceptable that workers who came to the U.S. in response to our call for help and our need for workers now be denied a voice to fight for what has always been theirs.

For the most part, braceros took physically demanding jobs in agriculture and railroad construction, and worked for as little as 40 cents an hour. Many had to put up with slave-like conditions, working long hours with few or no breaks, suffering injuries, and dealing with abusive employers. Many of the bracero families were impoverished. The money taken from their paychecks could have been extremely helpful to those families, either at the time or had it been returned to them when they returned to Mexico, as was promised. Instead, it was never seen.

That is why this legislation, the Bracero Justice Act, is so important. It is critical that we shift the arguments of this case from technicalities to merits. Let the court system and

those involved in the case examine the bank documents from the Bracero program, or investigate why most of those documents no longer exist or are incomplete or inconclusive. Let the courts determine who is responsible for the loss of this money. Let the courts determine if and how much money is owed to these workers. But let's not close this case on the basis that time has simply run out for these workers to demand justice. Let's not spend our time debating who has jurisdiction over this case. Let's pass the Bracero Justice Act so the case can move forward and justice and fairness can be restored.